

# THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

## The Table in the World

March 23, 1997

John M. Buchanan

The psalmist hankers for wings with which to fly away, but these are not the wings that are offered to us. What we are offered instead are the wings of a broody hen who longs to gather us as her own dear children. Beneath her life-giving breast there is room for all Jerusalem. All we have to do is to let her gather us and to recognize her for who and what she is. All we have to do, with joy that rises up and spills out of our mouths, is say, "Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord."

Barbara Brown Taylor  
*Looking for God in the City.*

FOURTH  
PRESBY  
TERIAN  
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY  
126 East Chestnut Street Chicago, Il 60611-2094  
Phone: (312) 787-4570  
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

**A TABLE IN THE WORLD**  
**John M. Buchanan**  
**Fourth Presbyterian Church**  
**March 23, 1997**

*"You prepare a table before me in the  
presence of my enemies;" Psalm 23:5 (NRSV)*

He doesn't have to do it, you know. He could stay in Galilee and no one would think the less of him.

With each successive hearing and experiencing of this story, I become increasingly aware of his intentionality. He didn't have to do it all. Palm Sunday did not happen to Jesus. He made it happen. He is doing something he means to do. He is coming into the center of his nation's capital in a manner guaranteed to attract attention and stir the hearts of men and women. He's risking controversy, conflict, perhaps even violence, and he doesn't have to do it. Who would blame him for staying in Galilee?

It's a great occasion in the life of the church. Having seen it, who can forget the sight of our children, processing with palm branches, some of them swatting each other, some taking a shot at a minister.

Who around here will ever forget Matthew Allerton, years ago, in the children's Palm Sunday parade around the neighborhood, weather permitting – which it often doesn't – getting the idea right, if not the precise wording, waving his palm and singing:

*"Oh Hosanna,  
Don't you cry for me  
I'm going to Alabama  
With a banjo on my knee".*

I was in Memphis last week and a pastor told me her favorite Palm Sunday vignette. Memphis is not far from Oxford, Mississippi and the football fortunes of Ole Miss are taken very seriously in this particular suburban Memphis Presbyterian church. One Palm Sunday my friend was doing her children's sermon and asked what the people were singing as Jesus rode into the city. No one answered, so she tried again. "You know, children, they were waving palm branches – it was a parade – just like what happens on football Saturdays, but they were cheering for Jesus, yelling something that begins with an 'H'." A light went on for one youngster, who in a clear voice shouted into the microphone the Ole Miss fight song:

*"Hoity Toity,  
God Almighty  
Who the hell are we? ..."*

It is a great day: powerful currents swirl around the event it remembers. And the notion that continues to compel me is that he didn't have to come. It was, for him, an act of high intentionality.

The story appears in all four Gospels, each telling it slightly differently. Mark's account seems to go out of its way to connect Jesus' behavior with passages in Hebrew scripture and tradition which have to do with the coming of a messianic king to save Israel. Mark wants his readers to connect what Jesus does here to a coronation scene described in Zechariah, even to the detail that the procession begins at the Mount of Olives and ends at the Temple. These are not decorative details. These are meaningful symbols for first century Jewish readers.

He chooses the route. Chooses to ride into the city on a donkey in exactly the way the promised Messiah is expected to arrive; acts out, apparently, an ancient promise which was both precious and prominent. And the crowd reacts, predictably, enthusiastically. They are part of a great moment, a dramatic occasion, the moment, perhaps, when God's kingdom comes and God's Messiah assumes his rightful place as Israel's King. And, of course, the whole noisy, dramatic demonstration is not unnoticed. The power brokers, scribes, Pharisees, chief priests, see it happening and know instantly that Rome will not tolerate very much by way of public patriotism; know instantly that the fragile accommodation they have established with the Roman occupying forces could be shattered if this public demonstration should get out of hand. And so, while poor people and children wave palms and spread garments and shout Hosanna, powerful, privileged people decide that he must be silenced. He must be stopped.

Jesus knows all of it, I believe. Knows full well where it all leads, knows the enormous risk that he will pay the price for this decision to come to the city for the Passover.

Why did he do it? It is the question that begs to be asked, is it not?

The late Henri Nouwen, whose words you have often heard quoted from this pulpit, or read on the front of the Sunday bulletin, was a popular and widely-read theologian. Nouwen was a Dutch Roman Catholic priest, professor at Yale, Notre Dame, a teacher and lecturer much in demand all over the world. He taught many of us a pastoral dimension of academic theology, taught that Christian doctrine must always be measured not only by its intellectual clarity and brilliance but by the kind of community it creates. Nouwen was one of those scholars who was so good at what he did, so personally winsome, that he needed a full-time secretary simply to process the invitations to speak, lecture, lead workshops and receive awards that he received every day.

A few years ago, Nouwen surprised his admirers by resigning from his prestigious academic post to join a religious community in Toronto called Daybreak, part of the L'Arche Communities founded by Jean Vanier to care for severely handicapped adults. And so this distinguished scholar

and teacher every day was responsible for the physical hygiene, bathing, feeding, caring for, talking to, living with severely handicapped – some physically, some mentally, many both – adults.

While he was at Daybreak, he continued to think and write and in a small meditation on Jesus' question to the disciples, Can You Drink This Cup, discussed his decision to move from the academic and lecture circuit to Daybreak. He explained that in the middle of his life he had decided that he wasn't living life deeply enough and that is what prompted the decision to live with and care for the most needy people he could think of. He wrote,

“My own life in this community has been immensely joyful, even though I never suffered so much, cried so much, or anguished so much as at Daybreak.” (p. 44).

He said that the intimacy and intensity of life at Daybreak gave him a much deeper understanding of Jesus' being with us and at the same time he rediscovered his vocation as a priest and a human being, a “compassionate being with” ... “connecting my own vulnerability with the vulnerability of those I live with.”

That is why Jesus came to Jerusalem, I think. A young man, in the middle of his life, passionately in love with God, passionate about his people, passionate about the suffering and longing and oppression of poor people, sick people, marginalized people. Passionate about the way the religion of his people had become a means of excluding and marginalizing those who did not fit the neat prescriptions and orthodoxies and ritualized moralities of the religious elite – he decided to be who he was and say what he wanted to say and do what he needed to do – in the center of his people's life in the city, the capital, where life was lived in all its intensity and harshness and beauty and cruelty and kindness. Jesus came to Jerusalem as an act of high and courageous intentionality in order to live life fully, to live his life as completely and deeply as possible. And the simple courage of it all and its relevance to our lives and decisions and ventures and risks and commitments continues to move me to my core.

But there is something more going on this day. The eyes of faith can see it. It is more than a heroic story for our inspiration and imitation. It is the demonstration of a truth that addresses your soul and mine, at our very depths, that place deep within us where we live and move and have our most authentic being.

It is that incredible notion described in the poetry of the Psalmist centuries before ...

*Where can I go from your spirit? ..  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

and in that most beautiful and beloved poem ever written,

*The Lord is my shepherd  
I shall not want.*

*Even though I walk through  
the valley of the shadow of  
death, I will fear no evil.*

The Holy One goes before us. There is nowhere we can go that God is not for us, behind us, ahead of us, a strong arm to hold us.

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies*

Jesus came to Jerusalem to demonstrate that.

Somewhere deep inside, you ask the fundamental human question. What's it all about? Am I simply a biological coincidence? Is there anything more to me, to life, than the accumulated total of my days and years? Is there anything behind, over, above, beyond and after me?

The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm suggests that God is present even in the darkest valley; that is, the most frightening and life-threatening circumstance, in the presence of your enemies, you can count on a table and security and safety and hospitality and grace. That's a very powerful metaphor in the ancient world, by the way. By the law of the desert, "once a traveler is accepted in a Bedouin tent he is guaranteed immunity from enemies who may be attempting to overtake him." In pastoral cultures, no human protection was greater than the hospitality of the table. [Bernard Anderson, Out of the Depths]

Jesus knew that Psalm. His faith was nurtured in the promise that the Holy One is present no matter where he went; that in the valley of the shadow, God and God's love and God's strength and compassion were present, that even in the presence of his foes, those who criticized and attacked him, those who willed his demise, those who, even as he rode into the city, were plotting his death, in their presence a table of reunion and sustenance and hospitality and love was prepared.

And so, you and I are invited this day to trust. As we decide to commit ourselves to risky ventures, as we decide to live our lives more deeply and fully, taking whatever risks are involved, as we descend into whatever hell awaits us, as we confront whatever enemies threaten, we are invited to remember the one who came to the city, and who lived unflinchingly, bravely, steadily and passionately because of a table set for him.

While at Daybreak, Henri Nouwen was involved in a very serious accident that was almost fatal. Afterward, he wrote,

"sooner or later the inevitability of our own death will catch up to us. In whatever way we run, death is there, never leaving us completely alone. Not a day passes in which we are not worried about the health of a family member, a friend, ourselves." [p. 90]

It is a common experience – that collision each of us has with the blunt fact of mortality. Mostly we smile about it. The distinguished novelists Shelby Foote and Walker Percy were lifelong dear friends and over the years maintained a wonderful, literate and often funny correspondence. Percy was a Christian. Foote was, and is, an agnostic. Their correspondence often touched on the mystery of faith. One time Foote wrote:

“This afternoon I go to have my eyes examined for new glasses. I always looked forward to this, gray hair and a slim dignity, the wisdom of the ages in my face, but I hadn’t foreseen the twinges. Moreover, it occurs to me I’m failing simultaneously at the top and the bottom. Someday my ailments will meet in the middle and that will be it. I cry out, ‘Not me, Lord! Not me!’ The Lord maintains a deadly silence as if He wasn’t there. I yell again. No answer. Maybe He’s not up there after all. Maybe He died like they say up East.” [p. 162]

God, this faith of ours suggests, is present, particularly at those times and places which seem to be testifying to the absence of God; times and places that seem almost God forsaken; times and places of human suffering and evil. At Cabrini-Green, with the parents of that baby killed in the blast in Tel Aviv, in Albania, Zaire and all the places where hatred and violence seem to deny the existence of God, or of human love and compassion. After World War II, as the terrible reality of the Holocaust slowly came to light and the nations began to acknowledge and deal with the horror and unspeakable cruelty, some said the Holocaust was final and unassailable proof that there is no God. Within the world of academic theology, a number of theologians announced the death of God. In a famous exchange with Richard Rubenstein, author Elie Wiesel, who was in Auschwitz and saw his father and other family members die, wondered why people who were not there announced the death of God, while those who were there experienced God’s presence.

There is no more profound mystery of faith than the experience of God’s presence at precisely those times and places in life which seem most God-forsaken. There is no more profound prayer – nor is there a stronger affirmation of that mystery than Jesus’ prayer, five days after coming into the city, betrayed, abandoned, tortured, dying ... “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.*

These words have been read and recited and prayed by millions of men and women down across the centuries. One time, years ago, when we had little children in our home, there was a community-wide polio immunization program. It was before easy, oral vaccines were available, so our duty as parents was to corral our children and tell them that we were all going to have a shot. Our youngest at the time, about three years old, was unusually quiet in the car on the way. When we arrived at the school where the shots were being administered, he stayed unusually close, refusing to let go of my hand. We got our shots – walked back to the car and still he was staying close, holding my hand tightly. Finally, he said, “Am I going to heaven now?” And it dawned on us that he didn’t know what a shot was. The only thing he knew about the subject

was that on television when someone got shot, he usually died. And so, in a sense he was, we concluded, walking into the valley of the shadow of death, holding his parents' hands.

*You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.*

Henri Nouwen and Joseph Cardinal Bernardin were good friends. As Cardinal Bernardin grew weaker, Nouwen came to see him. I know what they talked about – about drinking the cup of life fully, about the table set in the presence of our foes.

Nouwen wrote,

“My accident made me, at least for a little while, like a little child and gave me a short taste of the kingdom – God’s unconditional love when we have nothing left of our own strength.”

He didn’t have to go to Jerusalem. He did because he wanted to live life as deeply and fully as possible. He rode into the city, risking rejection, suffering and death and while it was briefly triumphant, the result of his entry was the events we will remember this Thursday and Friday. There is nowhere we can go that God is not present. We can give ourselves fully and deeply to life. We can be who we need to be and say what we need to say. We can risk and give and love passionately. We can walk right into the presence of our foes – because our Lord came to the city and because he has saved a place for us at the table.

Jesus Christ comes particularly in those times and places which seem most God-forsaken – but also those times when life is most intense, most completely human: our conflicts and struggles, our joys and sadnesses, our most passionate love, our most profound grief, our births and our deaths.

A table prepared.

All praise to him.

Amen.